

## EC=JC<sup>2</sup>: John Cage as Exemplary Creator<sup>1</sup>

by David Nicholls, Southampton

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Two months ago, BBC Radio 4's 'Front Row' programme reported on a copyright dispute between Peters Edition and Mike Batt. For those of you not familiar with the work of Batt—who rather conveniently was born in Southampton—he is the creator of The Wombles, and the composer-arranger behind such contemporary cultural phenomena as vampish violinist Vanessa Mae, girl-power string quartet Bond, and classical fusion band The Planets. The copyright dispute arose over Batt's inclusion, on The Planets' *Classical Graffiti* album, of a one-minute silent piece, credited to Batt / Cage, and intended—in Batt's words—as 'a tongue-in-cheek dig at the John Cage piece.' After the album's release, Batt was contacted by Peters Edition, who claimed infringement of copyright and a quarter of the track's royalties.<sup>2</sup>

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I relate this incident not because I wish to engage in a lengthy analysis of copyright law or of the ownership of ambient sound; nor, indeed, do I intend to examine Batt's claim that 'my silence is original silence,' interesting though that might be. Rather, the story is a typical illustration of the way in which the work of radical artists—and of John Cage in particular—tends to be interpreted by both the media and the general public. The philosophical and aesthetic concept behind Cage's seminal piece *4' 33"* is all too often either trivialised, through its use as the basis of humour, or misrepresented, through its deliberate cross-referral to unrelated areas of experience. As an example of the latter, let me quote from the work of philosopher Stan Godlovitch, who in his book *Musical Performance: A Philosophical Study* writes as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> (Editorial note: This paper was the key-note for Cage 2002: 90/10, a study day to discuss, perform and listen to John Cage's music. It took place on Saturday, 21 September 2002 at the Music Department of the University of Southampton. The day aimed to mark Cage's 90th birthday and the 10th anniversary of his death.)

<sup>2</sup> For further details, of both the case and its conclusion, consult BBC News Online. Mike Batt was ultimately required to pay royalties to Cage's publisher.

*Does Cage merit serious regard? Cage purportedly used 4' 33" to stress the equal importance of sound and silence in music. Most pieces contain elements of both; but some, like perpetual motion pieces, contain just sound. Why deny musical status to a work consisting of pure silence? If this is the main point of 4' 33" it seems a silly analogue to a sight gag. Imagine a culinary cousin, a gourmet's delight called Holes which consists of an empty folded napkin served with fresh coffee. The message: to stress the equal importance of air and solids in doughnuts. Some doughnuts, the ones with holes, contain elements of both, while others, jelly doughnuts, contain just solids. Why deny culinary status to doughnuts emphasizing pure air? <sup>3</sup>*

I'll spare you the rest of Godlovitch's analysis, which proceeds from this nonsensical analogy to conclude that 'Pieces like 4' 33" could never be musically typical.'

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Given that we have come together today to devote serious scholarly attention to the work of John Cage, I am obviously preaching to the converted when I say that the kind of slapstick stupidity perpetuated by Batt, Godlovitch, and their ilk, has to cease. But on what basis are we to argue for and achieve such a cessation? Not, I would suggest, by attempting to answer head-on the criticisms—for want of a less generous word—raised by Batt and Godlovitch; nor by perpetuating such clichés as Schoenberg's alleged description of his former pupil as 'Not a composer. But an inventor—of genius.'<sup>4</sup> Such approaches are both too easy to undertake, and too difficult to sustain; and they also serve to dignify the undignified or debatable, through the act of apparently taking them seriously. Instead, I believe that it is necessary to strive for Cage's unequivocal placement in the pantheon to which he rightfully belongs: as being among a group of stellar twentieth-century artists and thinkers whom the developmental psychologist Howard Gardner has characterised as 'modern masters.' Among those he so characterises, in his 1993 monograph *Creating Minds*, are Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, Igor Stravinsky, T.S. Eliot, Martha Graham, and Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Stan Godlovitch, *Musical Performance. A Philosophical Study*, New York (1998), 15. Thanks to Clemens Gresser for discovering this source.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the dubious origins of Schoenberg's remark, see Michael Hicks, 'John Cage's Studies With Schoenberg,' *American Music* 8/2 (1990), 125-140.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Gardner, *Creating Minds: An Anatomy of Creativity Seen Through the Lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham, and Gandhi*, New York (1993).

The bulk of the book is concerned with a detailed examination of the lives of those figures named above, whose achievements—Gardner posits—not only shed light on the nature of creativity but also elucidate the modern era. While each undoubtedly reinvented an area of human activity or understanding, Gardner emphasises that they are not unique: rather, they are chosen in order to constitute ‘a representative and fair sample drawn from a larger pool of individuals whose discoveries gave rise to one or another version of the modern era’ (Gardner, 6). Moreover, Gardner does not suggest that the achievements of such individuals are limited to recent times: his ‘representative and fair sample’ was taken from the modern era not least because it is only in recent history that there has existed ‘sufficient information about [such] individuals...that their creative processes and interim products could be examined.’ As Gardner puts it on page 13 of the book: ‘we do not have enough demythologised information about Bach and Aquinas, let alone Confucius or Moses, to analyze their creativity with much confidence.’

Although Cage is separated by one or even two generations from Gardner’s chosen subjects, it is worth remembering that he was affected by almost all of them, and in several cases was connected with them. The world in which Cage matured was definitively shaped by the theories of Freud and Einstein, and it was a proposed course of Freudian analysis that Cage, around the time of his separation from Xenia Cage, memorably rejected. As a former pupil of Schoenberg, Cage was for many years antithetically disposed to the music of Stravinsky; but in 1966—following Cage’s appearance as the Devil in a performance of *The Soldier’s Tale*—the two composers met and apparently got on quite well. Finally, Cage also met Martha Graham on at least one occasion, and many of the dancers and choreographers with whom he collaborated—not least Merce Cunningham—had studied or worked with her.

What Cage shares with Gardner’s subjects, however, is not casual acquaintance with, or tangential involvement in, their milieux. Gardner defines the creative individual as ‘a person who regularly solves problems, fashions products, or defines new questions in a domain in a way that is initially considered novel but that ultimately becomes accepted in a particular cultural setting’ (Gardner, 35). Furthermore—and most importantly for the purposes of this paper—towards the end of his book, Gardner identifies a set of common themes that emerge in the lives of creative individuals; and it is upon these

themes that he draws a composite portrait of what he terms the ‘Exemplary Creator.’ Gardner is

*well aware of the limitations of [such a] hypothetical portrait...[for] when it comes to offering generalizations about creativity, one must assess how essential each generalization is. In all probability, no single one of the factors...highlighted is critical for a creative life; but it may be that one needs at least a certain proportion of them, if the chances for a creative breakthrough are to be heightened. (Gardner, 362-3)*

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In Gardner’s idealized portrait, the Exemplary Creator is nicknamed ‘E.C.’ and is made female; however, it is interesting (and instructive) in the following series of précis to substitute ‘J.C.’ for ‘E.C.’ and ‘he’ for ‘she.’ I intend to summarize Gardner’s portrait of E.C. in three sections, dealing respectively with upbringing, maturation, and artistic achievements. In each case, I will précis Gardner’s description before drawing direct comparisons with Cage’s life and work. Note that I freely paraphrase Gardner in these précis, and accordingly will not specifically identify those phrases quoted directly from his text.

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### ***Upbringing***

*E.C. is raised ‘somewhat removed from the actual centers of power and influence in her society, but not so far away that she and her family are entirely ignorant of what is going on elsewhere.’ The family is ‘neither wealthy nor in dire financial straits’ and life is ‘reasonably comfortable, in a material sense.’ The home atmosphere ‘is more correct than it is warm’ and ‘moral, if not...religious.’ ‘E.C. develops a strict conscience [and] often passes through a period of religiosity...’ The family ‘is not highly educated, but [values] learning and achievement, about which [it holds] high expectations.’ In social terms, it is ‘prototypically bourgeois, holding dear the ambitions, respectability, and valuing of hard work that [are] associated with that class.’ When, relatively early on, E.C.’s ‘area of strength emerged...the family encouraged these interests’ though with some ambivalence concerning ‘a career that falls outside of the established professions.’ [adapted from Gardner, 360-1]*

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Those familiar with Cage’s background will recognise much in this description. He was born in Los Angeles and raised mainly in California, with brief spells in Michigan and

Ontario. I will return to the significance of this shortly. Cage's father—John Milton Cage Senior—was an idealistic inventor, and his mother—Lucretia 'Crete' Harvey—a sometime journalist for the Los Angeles Times. Family finances veered from the comfortable to the distinctly precarious, as a result of John Sr.'s occupation. Several of Cage's ancestors had been ministers of religion: for instance, his grandfather—Gustavus Adolphus Williamson Cage—was a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, who (among other exploits) travelled to Utah to decry Mormonism. His grandson described him as 'a man of extraordinary puritanical righteousness [who] would get very angry with people who didn't agree with him.'<sup>6</sup> Cage himself inherited Gustavus's religious zeal, at least in his early years: as a child, he was 'very much impressed by the notion of turning the other cheek'<sup>7</sup> while as a teenager he expressed interest first in following his grandfather into the Methodist Episcopal Church and later becoming an acolyte of the Liberal Catholic Church. The marriage between John Sr. and Crete was somewhat volatile, Crete being described as someone who 'never enjoyed having a good time.'<sup>8</sup> Other influences came from Cage's maternal grandmother—who lived in the family home and possessed a religiosity similar to Gustavus's—and from Crete's musical sisters, Marge and Phoebe. Education was much valued—note that Cage was sent to Los Angeles High School, and subsequently the exclusive Pomona College—though Cage's musical talent was grudgingly acknowledged. He was only allowed music lessons after much persistence, and Crete's attitude to his later work is perhaps summarized in her reaction on hearing his 1935 percussion Quartet: 'I enjoyed it, but where are you going to put it?'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Richard Kostelanetz (ed.), *Conversing with Cage*, New York (1988), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in David Revill, *The Roaring Silence*, London (1992), 31.

<sup>8</sup> John Cage, *A Year from Monday*, Middletown CT (1967), 102.

<sup>9</sup> John Cage, *Silence*, Middletown CT (1961), 264.

## **Maturation**

*By the time of adolescence, E.C. has ‘outgrown her home environment.’ In some cases, she ‘proceeds directly to work in a chosen domain’ although she may also have ‘flirted with a number of different career lines’ before a ‘crystallizing moment’ occurs. Having ‘already invested a decade of work in the mastery of [her] domain’ E.C. is near its forefront; ‘she has little in addition to learn from her family and from local experts, and...feels a quickened impulse to test herself against the other leading young people in the domain.’ Before long, she ‘ventures toward the city that is seen as a center of vital activities for her domain’ and with considerable speed ‘discovers in the metropolis a set of peers who share the same interests.’ The peer group ‘explore the terrain of the domain, often organizing institutions, issuing manifestos, and stimulating one another to new heights.’ At some point, E.C. finds ‘a problem area or realm of special interest, one that promises to take the domain into uncharted waters.’ This isolates E.C. from her peers and she ‘must work mostly on her own. She senses that she is on the verge of a breakthrough that is as yet little understood, even by her.’ At this crucial time, she ‘craves both cognitive and affective support, so that she can retain her bearings.’ Without it, ‘she might well experience some kind of breakdown.’ [adapted from Gardner, 361]*

In Cage’s case, the borderlines between upbringing, maturation, and artistic achievements blur a little in chronological terms, but once again the parallels between E.C. and J.C. are clearly evident. As I suggested earlier, the issue of location is particularly important for Cage: his home state, California, was at two levels ‘somewhat removed from the actual centers of power and influence’ of early twentieth-century society, being the best part of 3,000 miles from America’s East Coast, where could be found the country’s capitals both political and—more importantly—cultural. Consequently, we should not be surprised to learn that between the ages of 20 and 30, Cage was twice drawn to New York City, which he rightly saw as ‘a center of vital activities for [his] domain;’ indeed, he ultimately made Manhattan his home. However, America itself was also ‘somewhat removed’ from that traditional ‘[center] of power and influence,’ Europe; and thus Cage (like such contemporaries as Copland, Harris, and Thomson) was inevitably drawn to Paris, which—between the wars—was an even more vital centre of ‘activities for [his] domain.’ During his time in Europe, however, Cage was by no means fully committed to music, and ‘flirted’ with other areas of

activity. He studied architecture, and experimented with poetry and painting; towards the end of this sojourn, he began to compose.

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Back in America, Cage placed himself at the forefront of his domain—and continued his relationship with both New York and Europe—by studying first with Adolph Weiss and Henry Cowell, and subsequently with Schoenberg. In the second half of the 1930s—though on the West Coast rather than the East—he met a stimulating peer group that included composer Lou Harrison and several dancers, notably Merce Cunningham. Percussion groups were organised, and in 1940 the lecture-manifesto ‘The Future of Music: Credo’ was written. Towards the end of his period of study with Schoenberg, Cage identified the ‘problem area or realm of special interest’ that promised ‘to take his domain into uncharted waters’: specifically, through his teacher he realised that he ‘had no feeling for harmony.’ When Schoenberg told Cage that without that feeling he would always encounter an obstacle, or a wall through which he would be unable to pass, Cage vowed to devote his life to beating his head against that wall. The result—from the late 1930s—was a music based in duration, rather than pitch, which was capable of containing any (or no) sounds. That Cage during the 1940s became isolated from many of his peers is well known, as is the fact that following the failure of his marriage, he almost had a breakdown.

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### **Artistic Achievements**

*E.C. ‘succeeds in effecting at least one major breakthrough,’ the power of which may be ‘rather rapidly acknowledge[d]’ by the field. E.C. feels so special that she may appear ‘willing to enter into...a Faustian bargain...to maintain the flow that comes from effective, innovative work;’ this bargain may involve ‘the feeling of a direct pact with God.’ ‘E.C. works nearly all the time, making tremendous demands on herself and on others...she is self-confident, able to deal with false starts, proud and stubborn, and reluctant to admit mistakes.’*

*Given her ‘enormous energy and commitment,’ E.C. makes ‘a second breakthrough...about a decade after the first.’ This is ‘less radical, but...is more comprehensive and intimately integrated with [her] previous work in the domain.’ In attempting to retain her creativity, E.C. seeks ‘marginal status or heighten[s] the ante of asynchrony [in order to] maintain freshness and to secure the flow that accompanies great challenges and exciting discoveries.’ Among the outpouring of E.C.’s works, a few stand out as defining, ‘both for E.C. herself and for members of the surrounding*

*field.* Finally, as E.C. grows older, 'limits on [her] creative powers emerge...[though she] becomes a valued critic or commentator...She lives on until old age, gains many followers, and continues to make significant contributions until her death.' [adapted from Gardner, 362]

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Cage's first major breakthrough, as noted earlier, occurred in the late 1930s, when he devised his so-called 'square-root form.' This was an important step along the path towards his ultimate goal, 'giving up control so that sounds can be sounds.' Approximately a decade later, Cage achieved that goal—and his second major breakthrough—through his adoption of chance procedures. During this period—and, indeed, beyond it—Cage's energy and commitment were enormous, and he began to receive recognition (as well as notoriety) in both America and Europe. It was also at this time—albeit in connection with his often-precarious financial position—that he felt he had a guardian angel, though the nearest he came to E.C.'s 'Faustian bargain' was in the 1966 performance of *The Soldier's Tale*.

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Although Cage never really had followers in the conventional sense of that word, from 1950 onwards he began to influence an increasing number of younger composers and artists, starting with Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, and Christian Wolff; his work was also much imitated by the European avant-garde, notably Stockhausen and Cornelius Cardew. Cage himself frequently 'heightened the ante' in order to maintain creative freshness, as is seen variously in his return to conventionally notated music in *Cheap Imitation*, and in his increasing involvement with both theatre and with other artistic genres. In addition, he became highly valued as a commentator on contemporary culture, and in some quarters his writings were at least as influential as his artistic creations. Despite increasing ill health, Cage survived until just before his eightieth birthday, and continued to make significant contributions—in music, visual art, poetry, and prose—right through to the end. Among his last projects were a major essay ('Overpopulation and Art'), a film (*One<sup>11</sup>*), and a curated exhibition (*Rolywholyover*).

It should, then, be manifestly clear that there are many parallels between JC<sup>2</sup>—John Milton Cage Jr.—and Howard Gardner’s E.C., or Exemplary Creator. Indeed, the parallels are so numerous as to make one wonder parenthetically whether JC (who is briefly mentioned on page 402 of Gardner’s book) might in fact have been the model for EC. However, the important point in this is the degree to which Cage fits Gardner’s definition of the creative individual: ‘a person who regularly solves problems, fashions products, or defines new questions in a domain in a way that is initially considered novel but that ultimately becomes accepted in a particular cultural setting.’ For Western art music in the post-Wagnerian era, the fundamental problem was arguably that of syntax: how—in a music of increasing chromatic, rhythmic, and timbral saturation—could sounds be arranged grammatically, in order that their connection and relation be demonstrated? The twentieth-century’s conventional answers were essentially of two types: the first, typified by the work of the Second Viennese School and the Eurocentric high modernist avant garde, was to create a new language from the remnants of the old, forming its syntax through analogous means; the second, typified by the work of almost everyone else, was to ignore the problem entirely, and instead extend the vocabulary and syntactic rules of the existing grammar.

Cage’s approach—and it is this that marks him out as a truly exemplary creator—was to attempt to solve the problem by turning it on its head. He did this by defining a new set of questions, the most fundamental of which posited entirely new relationships between sound and silence, between intention and non-intention, and between art and life. This led him to fashion products—both philosophical and material—that many commentators (including Mike Batt and Stan Godlovitch) have found novel to the point of inspiring ridicule. Yet I would suggest that Cage’s approach will ultimately come to be broadly accepted in our particular cultural setting. Let us remember that Freud’s theories of the unconscious, and Einstein’s of relativity, were initially greeted with outright hostility; Picasso’s cubism and Stravinsky’s primitivism were condemned when first aired in public; and Gandhi’s political and humanitarian efforts on behalf of his fellow Indians in colonial South Africa led to him being jailed on more than one occasion. Yet all of these supposedly misguided creators were eventually triumphant, and their ideas vindicated: their work came to define the future direction of each of their respective fields; and each has subsequently been hailed as a pioneer of new ways of

thinking. It can only be a matter of time, then, before John Cage is recognised as an exemplary creator of equal merit, and at last rewarded not with ridicule, but rather with the respect he so richly deserves.